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ABSTRACT

The University of Calgary (Alberta, Canada) has two half-courses which can be categorized as early exploratory field experiences and which have existed over 5 years. One half-course is mainly theoretical in its focus and consists primarily of an analysis and description of education in contemporary society. In contrast, the other half-course presents the practical realities of teaching to those students who are seriously interested in exploring the teaching profession. It provides for a gradual, carefully planned exposure to the educational environment through observation and participatory experiences. Students complete the course before they enter the Faculty of Education. The major course objective is to provide students with on-campus activities, in-school and other experiences necessary for broadening their understanding of teaching and their own suitability in relation to "wanting to teach" and "being able to teach." The course structure reflects the course objective in numerous ways. First, the students are enrolled in small classes to allow for individual attention. Second, large blocks of time are scheduled for in-depth visits to schools and intensive on-campus discussion and debriefing sessions. Third, the planned activities throughout the course involve students in a variety of experiences. Results of a survey of students' (n=220) reactions, which provide an indication of course aspects considered most significant and meaningful, are presented. (JMK)

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Deciding to Become a Teacher:

A Shared Responsibility

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DECIDING TO BECOME A TEACHER: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Introduction

In recent years much discussion surrounding teacher preparation programs has focussed on the need for an early exploratory field experience in such programs. Pre-student teaching field experiences are offered in many teacher education programs. In 1978 the Association of Teacher Education (ATE) commissioned a study to survey the extent and nature of these offerings in the U.S. teacher education institutions. A similar study of Canadian institutions was completed in 1981.[1]

Researchers found that early exploratory experiences are a relatively recent development in teacher education; most programs have been in existence only two to four years. Possibly because it is so recent, the terminology and aim for the early field experiences appear ambiguous and lacking in focus. Few institutions are aware of early exploratory field experiences in other institutions, again, indicating how new these are.

At present there is a paucity of research on the effectiveness of these programs. Most of the research consists of impressions gained from teachers, students and faculty on a rather informal basis. Many institutions stated that the exploratory field experience programs were being revised, but few revisions seemed to be based on empirical research findings.

In this paper, a description of an early exploratory field experience will be provided. The course rationale, structure, and personnel will be

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[1] R.J. Twa and Djap D. Dung, "Exploratory Field Experience in Canadian Education," papers distributed by the Faculty of Education, The University of Lethbridge, April and June, 1981.

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described in detail. In addition, reactions to the course and preliminary research findings will be shared which provide some indication as to the aspects of the course considered to be most significant and meaningful.

Description of an early exploratory field experience program

The University of Calgary has two half-courses which would be categorized as early exploratory field experiences and which have been in existence for over five years. One half-course is mainly theoretical in its focus and consists primarily of an analysis and description of education in contemporary society. In contrast, the other half-course presents the practical realities to those students who are seriously interested in exploring the teaching profession. It provides for a gradual, carefully planned exposure to the educational environment through two types of experiences - one which might be termed "observational" and the other might be called "participatory." A further unique feature of the course is that students complete the course before they enter the Faculty of Education. The course enrollees, thus, include a cross-section of students whose possible future aspirations are for faculties other than education.

Course rationale

Teacher training often refers to the concept of "good teaching" but does little in providing potential teachers with opportunities to experience the process of education first-hand at the various grades. The intent of Calgary's course is to facilitate direct contact with communities, schools, teachers and students; encourage exploration of the individual's attitudes, aptitudes, and talents in relation to teaching; and allow students the opportunity to formulate a position on their suitability

toward teaching at a particular level with particular students.

The experiential focus provides the student with opportunities to observe and analyze the processes and concepts internal and external to the school and to gain insights into education from those who comprise the educational community. As a result of these experiences and by seriously thinking about their personal motivations and aptitudes, students are in a better position to decide what they have to offer the educational profession and what it has to offer them.

Course structure

The major course objective is to provide students with on-campus activities, in-school and other experiences necessary for broadening their understanding of teaching and of their own suitability in relation to "wanting to teach" and "being able to teach." The course structure reflects the course objective in numerous ways. First, the students are enrolled in tutorial classes (maximum 15 students) to allow for the careful nurturing and counselling of students in a small, responsive group situation. During both on-campus activities and off-campus school visits, the small group format enhances the interaction among students, in-field teachers and university instructors.

Second, large blocks of time are scheduled for in-depth visits to schools and intensive on-campus discussion and debriefing sessions. For half-days at a time, students are immersed in the complexities of teaching and schooling.

Third, the planned activities throughout the course involve students in a variety of experiences designed to broaden their understanding of teaching and learning. In discussions with principals, pupils and teachers, the students are encouraged to explore what teaching and learning

is and why people teach. Field visits, directed observations and subsequent analyses encourage an understanding of the teaching role, the variety of pupils' learning styles and the diversity of teaching styles. In order to experience the role of "director of the learning experience" and a subsequent analysis of personal strengths and weaknesses, the students are involved in peer instruction experiences. School-sponsored presentations and discussions, followed by weekly on-campus seminars, are conducted to acquaint students with school philosophies and structures, and the demands placed on teachers and schools.

Course personnel

The exploratory field experience course demands considerable coordination among students, instructors of 36 sections, the principals and teachers of some 50 elementary, junior high and high schools. It is only through the mutual support and commitment of both university and field personnel that the course is possible. The tasks of timetabling, organizing class schedules, contacting schools and providing information fall to the coordinator of the exploratory field experiences program.

Teachers and school administrators in the schools play an integral role in the course. The school administration is responsible for enlisting the services of competent, empathic staff members to become involved in the program. As well, in cooperation with the university coordinator, the administration is responsible for scheduling on-campus orientation to its programs and personnel.

The teachers open their classrooms to the students who come to observe and question teachers about teaching, pupils, schooling, the lesson observed or educational issues in general. Students are usually interested in what it is like to teach students at a particular grade level, what

demands are placed on teachers during the first year of teaching, and what experienced teachers find enjoyable or difficult about their job.

Reactions to the Course

Informal discussions, planning meetings and survey questionnaires have provided several avenues for communicating reactions to those who revise and schedule the course. The comments from principals, teachers and students convey a clear message of support for the exploratory field experiences.

Comments from Participants

Principals and teachers of cooperating schools have consistently supported and promoted this early exploratory field experience program. Typical comments frequently made by teachers and principals are:

"It's about time the university offered an introductory course such as this that gets potential teachers out into the schools before their fourth year so they know what they are getting int. I wish I had been offered such a course."

"We really enjoy opening our doors to guests who are non-threatening and interested in what we are doing. Pupils have a chance to interact with adults in a positive way and show off some of the things they are doing."

Students, too, have much to say about their experiences in the courses. A sampling of comments follows:

"Putting everything else aside, I feel that because of my newly acquired knowledge of the teaching profession, I am even more excited to begin. I believe that the faculty is doing a fairly thorough though elusive job of showing us the facts. There needs to be a greater emphasis upon teacher training and participation, not simply ideologies."

"I can now see both the positive and negative sides of teaching. It

is important for prospective teachers to realize that teaching is not an easy job. This class has done that."

"I've lost interest in becoming a full-time teacher. I would like to teach music privately in my home. I would be interested in pursuing a music program at a university."

"I have found several problems teachers face that never occurred to me. I have more doubts about my choice since I know more of what is involved."

"It provided a better understanding of the main issues in our schools today. It made me aware of the important qualities which a prospective teacher should acquire to be successful in their teaching careers."

"I have decided that I do not wish to become a teacher...(I should) leave university for a year and reconsider what I should do with my future. I have considered this decision since the beginning of the winter session and, through class discussion and school observations, have realized I am not yet ready to be a teacher."

Preliminary research findings

As described earlier, the course is comprised of a variety of activities which take place in both on-campus and off-campus locations. A list of 15 significant program objectives were identified by instructors and administered as a survey to 60 students enrolled in the Spring, 1983 semester and 160 students registered in the Fall, 1983 semester.

The purpose of the survey was to determine which items were perceived to be most significant to students and, secondly, whether there was a significant difference in the impact on learning related to location (off-campus and on-campus).

The fifteen items (or course objectives) identified for the survey include:

1. Become aware of different levels of children's abilities, interests and behaviours across divisions.

2. Become aware of different levels of children's abilities, interests and behaviours within a grade.

3. Become aware of the roles a teacher must assume.

4. Understand the role of the school within a community.

5. Identify characteristics of effective teaching.

6. Observe a variety of teaching strategies.

7. Identify teaching strategies suitable to older and younger children.

8. Identify a variety of classroom management techniques.

9. Understand and interpret the philosophy stated by each school.

10. Recognize how a school is organized.

11. Understand the role of administration (principals) in a teacher's life.

12. Become aware of outside pressures and influences upon a school and teacher.

13. Become aware of content preparation needed to teach in grades 1 through 12.

14. Gain information regarding myself in relation to my suitability for teaching.

15. Become more aware of my attitudes toward myself (self-concept) and how they can affect my suitability for teaching.

Applying the Wilcoxin Matched-Fairs Signed-Ranks test to the data a number of items indicated significant mean difference in learning impact between on-campus and off-campus locations. The data are presented in Table I.

TABLE I

ON-CAMPUS VERSUS OFF-CAMPUS ACTIVITIES

ITEM NUMBER	TIED VALUES PER ITEM	ON-CAMPUS MEAN	OFF-CAMPUS MEAN	Z-SCORE	2-TAILED PROBABILITY
1	13	2.80	3.58	-4.26	0.0001*
2	16	2.63	3.38	-4.05	0.0001*
3	28	3.27	3.62	-2.68	0.007 *
4	27	2.75	3.06	-2.56	0.011 *
5	20	3.22	3.53	-2.28	0.026
6	11	2.78	3.72	-4.36	0.0001*
7	15	2.55	3.34	-4.32	0.0001*
8	16	2.74	3.48	-3.76	0.0001*
9	26	3.33	3.54	-1.45	0.149
10	23	2.88	3.34	-2.82	0.005 *
11	20	2.96	3.12	-0.84	0.399
12	23	2.71	2.88	-1.30	0.195
13	23	2.51	3.00	-3.39	0.001 *
14	32	3.39	3.58	-1.73	0.084
15	34	3.31	3.58	-1.68	0.094

* -Significant at the 0.01 level
Results for Wilcoxin Matched-Pairs Signed-Ranks Test

The results in Table I reveal that for nine items a significant mean difference appears at the 0.01 level between off-campus and on-campus perceived impact on learning in favour of the off-campus experiences.

Of interest is the trend for students to select off-campus learning to be more significant for 9 out of the total 15 course objectives or survey items. The designers of the course are lead to the conclusion that

off-campus in-the-school experiences are of utmost importance in the structure of an early exploratory field experience program.

Of further interest is the identification of the specific objectives or survey items which showed significant mean differences between on-campus and off-campus experiences in favour of off-campus occasion. The items showing significant mean differences are listed in Table II.

Table II

Items That Show A Significant Mean Difference

1.	Become aware of different levels of children's abilities, interests and behaviours across divisions.
2.	Become aware of different levels of children's abilities, interests and behaviours within a grade.
3.	Become aware of the roles a teacher must assume.
4.	Understand the role of the school within a community.
6.	Observe a variety of teaching strategies.
7.	Identify teaching strategies suitable to older and younger children.
8.	Identify a variety of classroom management techniques.
10.	Recognize how a school is organized.
13.	Become aware of content preparation needed to teach in grades 1 through 12.

It was anticipated that items 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8 would be significantly related to the off-campus experience. For several items, specifically 4, 10, and 13, it is gratifying to note the impact of the off-campus occasion to be significant in gaining an understanding of the stated objective as perceived by students.

It had been anticipated that items 14 and 15 would be significantly related to the off-campus experiences. Item 14 - "gain information regarding myself in relation to my suitability for teaching" and Item 15 - "become aware of my attitudes toward myself (self-concept) and how they can affect my suitability for teaching" were items not showing mean differences between off-campus and on-campus experiences. The findings lead the instructors in the course to infer that on-campus discussions, peer-teaching, lectures and related activities are perceived to be as significant as off-campus experiences in assisting students to learn about these two items.

Conclusions

Consistently, the writers who describe the nature and effectiveness of exploratory field experiences suggest two main reasons for including such experiences in teacher preparation programs. The reasons are the students' "need to know" and the institutions' "need to know."[3] The student needs to know whether he or she wishes to choose teaching as a career.

> "Almost every student entertains a different notion of what schools and teaching are all about. This is one of the major reasons why students who think they want to be teachers sometimes get out into schools and find they do not. Their notion of schools and teaching simply was not what they found when they started teaching. For some students, the reality is at such variance with their aspirations for teaching, they simply work or continue to be part of it. With an early field experience program, the student has the opportunity to examine his personal ideas about schools and teaching in light of the reality of the situation.[4]"

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[3] Peggy Elliott and Robert Mays, Early Experiences in Teacher Education (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1979), pp. 5-10.

[4] Ibid., pp. 8-9

The institutions also "need to know" who should be selected and admitted, initially, into the faculty of education and, on a more encompassing level, into the teaching profession. Elliott and Mays also state:

> "Without early field experiences, preservice teachers may believe themselves to be making good progress toward their goal of becoming good teachers because of a good grade point average in their professional course when, in fact, they are not able to translate their theory into effective practice. In these situations, the university needs such information about a student as early as possible in order to redirect the student into a career in which he or she can be successful."

Twa and Dung confirm these findings and suggest that institutions must be prepared, through selection or rejection procedures, to weed out those students who cannot or will not accept advisement on their unacceptable attitudes and performance.

Although the paucity of research allows for limited conclusion on the effectiveness of early exploratory field experience programs, the initial information does indicate that students do benefit from these experiences. Students are able to make more intelligent decisions about their own suitability or desire for the craft of teaching. Institutions, as well, are provided another means for screening and selecting potential teacher candidates. Presently, the conclusion can be drawn that most persons responsible for teacher preparation consider the early exploratory field experience programs to be desirable, although there continues to be considerable diversity of opinion about the specific nature of such programs.

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